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ABSTRACT

To understand better how reviewing and other forms of evaluative journalism influence audiences and to test a proposed model, a series of experiments on 410 undergraduates assessed how initial film-viewing interest level (low, medium, high) and review direction (negative, mixed, positive) affected interest in film attendance. First, an extended Solomon design demonstrated that a pretest using short verbal descriptions of films had no significant effect on post-review interest. Repeated pretests showed that the procedure was highly reliable. Low, moderate, and high interest films were then selected to determine whether the effects of reviews were uniform for films of different interest levels and to ascertain what percentage of post-treatment interest was due to initial pretest interest and to review direction. Review effects proved generally uniform across interest levels. Pretest interest and review direction combined accounted for 51% of the variance, but pretest interest alone accounted for 37%. Results suggest that an Initial Interest Modification Model of review effects is robust. (Two figures and three tables of data are included; 16 references are attached.) (SR)

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Activating, Measuring and Manipulating Interest in an Artistic Event:

An Initial Interest Modification Model

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Running Head: Activating and Measuring Interest

Author Notes

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Abstract

To better understand how reviewing and other forms of evaluative journalism influence audiences, a series of experiments on 410 undergraduates assessed how initial film-viewing interest level (low, medium, high) and review direction (negative, mixed, positive) affect interest in film attendance. First, an extended Solomon design demonstrated that a pretest using short verbal descriptions of films had no significant effect on post-review interest. Repeated pretests showed that the procedure was highly reliable. Low, moderate, and high interest films were then selected to determine whether the effects of reviews were uniform for films of different interest levels and to ascertain what percentage of post-treatment interest was due to initial pretest interest and to review direction. Review effects proved generally uniform across interest levels. Pretest interest and review direction combined accounted for 51% of the variance, but pretest interest alone accounted for 37%. Results suggest that an Initial Interest Modification Model of review effects is robust.

Activating, Measuring and Manipulating Interest in an Artistic Event:

An Initial Interest Modification Model

Ever since Hovland and his colleagues brought the rigors of experimentation to the study of persuasion, Delia notes, attitude change has been the "dependent variable of greatest interest" (1987, p. 64). Yet Wyatt and Badger (1988) have insisted that, because attitudes are usually defined as consistent and enduring variables (McGuire, 1973; Petty and Cacioppo, 1981; Fishbein & Ajzen, 1976), attitude theory bears limited applicability to mass media reviewing and other forms of evaluative journalism, which influence more capricious and ephemeral responses.

Wyatt and Badger (1987) have also suggested that, although an overriding purpose of persuasion is to influence audience agreement, the primary purpose of reviewing is to affect audience interest in consuming an art form or event. Interest is, in fact, the major variable mass media reviewers can effectively manipulate, since they cannot directly control interpersonal, tactical and economic aspects involved in a decision to consume an art form. And audience

members can hardly agree or disagree with a review until after they have experienced an event.

Further, Wyatt and Badger have argued that persuasion strategies suggested by leading theories--creation and resolution of cognitive dissonance, elaboration of carefully constructed arguments, manipulation of compliance-gaining tactics, invocation of social judgment, etc.--rarely appear in reviewing. Rather, mass media reviews and other forms of evaluative journalism--including much sports, consumer, and political writing--affect audience interest primarily through two variables: (1) the level of information about an event or object (low, high) and (2) and the direction of evaluation (negative, mixed, positive) of that event or object. In fact, such an understanding of reviews and allied forms suggests that a new category of persuasion--evaluative persuasion, which emphasizes assertions of value rather than common rhetorical devices--might be fruitfully examined as a separate strategy.

Building on this understanding, an elementary hypothetical model of review processing can be constructed by examining reactions that even the most basic review may evoke. Such a review might consist of

nothing more than a bylined statement announcing something such as: "There's going to be a symphony concert in the park tonight. This city has a generally mediocre orchestra, but I've heard a preview rehearsal of this performance, and it's pretty good. Included are works by Mozart, Brahms, and Holst." A more elaborate review might contain additional background information, more specific information about the performers and the music, and additional evaluation of the performance.

Before the review, readers will already possess various latent initial interest levels in attending symphony concerts. This latent interest could already have been activated into manifest initial interest by a brief notice such as, "The symphony will play in the park." Or reader interest could be transformed into manipulated manifest interest by other informative or suasive messages. In this model, latent interest--whether high, moderate, or low--should prove crucial in determining the degree of any future interest manipulated by subsequent messages.

Previous research (Wyatt & Badger, 1987, 1988) has shown that extensive neutral information alone will exert a positive effect on interest if it is not accompanied by negative or mixed evaluation in a

review. The inclusion of negative or mixed adjectives will, however, depress interest, while the addition of positive adjectives will further heighten interest. But even the most positive review might do little to interest a person with an aversion to concerts, and even the most negative review might fail to steer a symphony devotee away. Previous research, however, has failed to assess adequately the role of latent interest in determining subsequent interest in an event.

The model outlined here focuses on three primary components: (1) subjects' latent initial interest in consuming an artistic event; (2) subjects' manifest initial interest as it is activated by brief information about the artistic event; and (3) subjects' manifest manipulated interest as it is altered by additional information and evaluation of the artistic event. Only two of these variables--information and evaluation--are largely under a reviewer's control; other external social and environmental factors, important as they are, lie beyond this two way, media-individual model.

In previous experiments, Wyatt and Badger (1984) have demonstrated that review direction (negative, mixed, positive) exercises a significant effect on both

prior interest in attending a film and on post-viewing evaluation. Wyatt and Badger (1987) have also shown that a judgment-free "nonreview" elevates film-attendance interest almost as much as a positive review identical in all respects except for the presence of evaluative adjectives. Wyatt and Badger (1988) have shown, as well, that evaluation direction (negative, mixed, positive) and information level (low, high) both exert significant effects on interest, but the effect of evaluation direction (12% of the variance) was greater than the effect of information level (3%). The effects of reviews on films of different latent initial interest levels, however, has not been examined in previous research, and the relative effects of latent interest and review direction remain unknown.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The current series of studies, then, was designed to inquire into several important considerations: whether it is reasonable to assume that latent initial interest levels exist before exposure to specific information about an artistic event; whether laboratory procedures designed to measure this initial interest activate latent interest, alter pre-existing interest or create new interest; to what extent initial

interest, measured by a pretest procedure, predicts posttest interest even after manipulation by reviews; and whether reviews of different evaluative directions exert symmetrical effects on films of low, moderate, and high initial interest levels.

Research by Haskins (1960a, 1960b, 1975) and Haskins and Kubas (1979) has indicated that pretests of interest can accurately predict actual readership under conditions where the pretests could not contaminate the effects. Therefore, it seems that certain pretest methods actually measure latent initial interest rather than manipulate it. It remains an open question whether prior measurements of that interest contaminate later measurements on the same subjects.

Because review direction in previous experiments (Wyatt & Badger, 1984, 1987) accounted for such a small amount of variance in post-treatment film-attendance interest (11%, 7%), the initial interest of subjects before review exposure should exercise considerable influence if the model suggested here is valid.

The limited effect of reviews in Wyatt and Badger's previous research also suggested that review effects are not powerful enough to metamorphose a film of one interest level into a film of another interest

level. That is, while a positive review of a low interest film might elevate interest beyond the level produced by a negative review of a high interest film, it would not be expected to raise interest above that of a positive review of a high interest film.

The reasoning behind most of the foregoing assumptions follows classical marketing principles, which insist that product promotion stimulates pre-existing demand rather than creating that demand.

Additionally, it was expected that review effects might not be symmetrical for films of very high or low initial interest levels. For example, it was possible that, with a high interest film, the positive review might exercise little effect in raising already elevated interest, but that the negative review might lower high interest considerably. Conversely, with a low interest film, the negative review might reduce already low interest only slightly, but the positive review might increase interest markedly.

Given these considerations, the following hypotheses were adopted: (1) Pretesting interest in attending a film will not significantly affect posttest interest after exposure to reviews of different evaluative directions; (2) methods of pretesting

interest will prove reliable in delineating films of low, moderate, and high initial interest levels; (3) initial interest in attending films of different interest levels will account for a significantly greater percentage of the variance in post-treatment interest than will review direction (negative, mixed, positive, nonreview); (4) after manipulation by review direction, films with different initial interest levels will retain their relative rank order within treatments and will retain their general rank order.

Test of Pretest Effects

Method

Design. To determine whether pretests of interest level exert a contaminating effect on post-treatment interest after reading reviews, an extended Solomon experimental design was employed. The Solomon design assesses pretest effects by randomly exposing half the subjects in each treatment group to the pretest while withholding the pretest from the other half.

The pretest method selected for the experiment was developed by Haskins (1960a, 1960b, 1975; Haskins & Kubas, 1979; McLaughlin, Haskins, & Feinberg, 1970; Stempel, 1967; Stevenson, 1973) and employs 0-100 "thermometer" scales to measure interest based on short

verbal descriptions of media content. This method has been shown to provide accurate prediction of interest in completely produced messages (Haskins & Kubas, 1979). It has also been shown (Haskins & Kubas, 1979) to provide criterion-valid predictions of actual media behavior--including magazine article readership, magazine advertisement readership, paperback book sales, readership of syndicated newspaper columns, and readership of comic strips. An identical 0-100 scale was used to measure post-treatment interest in the film.

Materials. For the pretest, short neutral verbal descriptions--including the title, a one-sentence plot summary, and a list of the principal stars--were prepared for 12 films, including the experimental film. These films had never been publicized in the region where the experiment took place and were chosen to represent a variety of initial interest levels. Some were new, as yet unreleased, films, and others were older films that had never been widely shown.

In constructing the review treatments, a systematic procedure followed in previous studies (Wyatt & Badger, 1984, 1987, 1988) was adopted. First a positive review was written; then mixed and negative

reviews were constructed by substituting mixed or negative adjectives for the positive adjectives; finally, a neutral nonreview was produced by removing all evaluative adjectives.

Subjects. Subjects were 290 students enrolled in four large mass communication lecture courses--two for upper division non-majors, two for lower division majors--at a Southeastern state university. Each subject was randomly assigned to one of the four review treatments, and, within review treatments, to the pretest or pretest-withheld condition.

Results

A 2 x 4 (pretest condition x review direction) analysis of variance indicated that the main effect for review direction was significant, $F(3,282) = 21.34$, $p < .001$, replicating previous experiments. No significance was found, however, for the main effect of pretest condition, $F(1,282) = 1.21$ $p > .05$, or for the interaction effect between review direction and pretest condition, $F(3,282) = .23$, $p > .05$. Thus, the first hypothesis--that pretesting interest in attending a film will not significantly affect post-treatment interest--was accepted. The Haskins method of pretesting interest was found to be nonreactive.

Pretest, posttest and gain score means are reported in Table 1.

Insert Table 1 about here

Discussion

These results suggest that the Haskins pretest method activates pre-existing latent interest rather than creating interest. The short descriptions constructed were purposely denotative and neutral in tone, designed only to inform, not to persuade. Further, because the pretests exerted no effect on post-treatment interest, it seemed reasonable that they measured rather than altered initial interest, making the following study of the effects of initial interest, in fact, possible.

Pretest Selection of Films of Different Interest Levels

Method

Design. Because the Haskins method displayed no contaminating effects, the procedure was adopted for a series of three pretests to isolate films of low, moderate, and high initial interest. The first such pretest was actually part of the Solomon design reported above and indicated that the test film

possessed moderate initial interest. Later pretests were administered in connection with follow-up experiments either to predict or confirm initial interest levels for each of the three experimental films selected--in effect pretesting the initial interest of each film three times.

Materials. Two of the pretests included identical lists of 12 films, accompanied by short verbal descriptions constructed by the method described above. In a third pretest, only eight films from the original 12 were represented; four were eliminated because the films had been publicized in the area.

Subjects. For the series of pretests, subjects totaled 410 students from introductory mass communication courses spread over three semesters spanning two academic years.

Results

Subjects' ratings of films remained remarkably constant from pretest to pretest (see Table 2). The overall means of interest ratings for each group of films tested were within one point of each other on a 0-100 scale--even after four films were subtracted during the third pretest. Rank orders among the tested films showed only slight variation, and the means of

the films selected to represent low, moderate, and high interest levels showed only modest fluctuation.

Insert Table 2 about here

In assessing reliability, both Pearson's r and Kendall's tau_b were used to measure the strength of relation among the means and rank orders for each film in each pretest. Pearson correlations were exceedingly high between the first and second pretests (r = .96, p < .001), the first and third pretest (r = .97, p < .001), and the second and third pretest (r = .99, p < .001). Rank order correlations between the first and second pretests, which included identical films, were also very high (Kendall's tau_b = .93, p < .001). And rank order correlations among the eight films shared by all three pretests were perfect (Kendall's tau_b = 1.00, p < .001). The second hypothesis--pretest means will prove significantly reliable in delineating films of low, moderate, and high initial interest levels--was therefore accepted.

Based on the series of pretests, three films emerged to represent low, moderate, and high interest levels. The low interest film consistently ranked last

in pretest interest and hovered near the boundary of the first standard deviation below the mean. The moderate interest film, though relatively high in the rank order, was only a few points above the mean and well within the first standard deviation above the mean. The high interest film consistently ranked highest in the pretest and hovered near the boundary of the first standard deviation above the mean. Pretest means, standard deviations, and rank orders for the three selected films are reported in Table 2.

The Effect of Initial Interest on Post-treatment Interest

Method

Design. During the selection and conformation of the test films, three separate pretest-posttest controlled laboratory experiments were also conducted to test the effects of initial interest level (low, moderate, high) and review direction (negative, mixed, positive, nonreview) on post-treatment interest. Initial interest level was measured on 0-100 scales following the Haskins method, and post-treatment interest was again assessed on separate 0-100 scales.

Data from the three experiments were then combined for statistical analysis, a procedure which required

merging results from subjects randomly assigned to review treatments within each experiment but not randomly assigned to initial interest levels from experiment to experiment. However, given both the uniformity of initial interest and the demographic similarity, the three experimental groups were judged homogeneous.

Materials. The review treatments in all three experiments were constructed according to the previously described procedure--substituting negative, mixed, or positive adjectives, or removing adjectives entirely--while holding background detail and plot summary constant. To further ensure uniformity, review treatments for all three interest levels were identical in evaluative adjectives and phrases, and varied only in plot summary and background detail. That is, within any given interest level, a given actor's performance might be described as "excellent/satisfactory/awful," but the actor so evaluated carried a different name and role in a different plot depending on whether he appeared in the low, moderate, or high interest film.

Subjects. The same 410 subjects who also participated in the interest level pretests served as subjects.

Results

A one-way analysis of covariance (review direction x initial interest score) showed highly significant effects for both review direction, $F(3,393) = 10.29$, $p < .001$, and for initial interest score, $F(1,393) = 304.62$, $p < .001$. Interaction between review direction and initial interest score was not, however, significant, $F(3,393) = 1.23$, $p > .05$. Multiple regression analysis measuring the effect of initial interest and review direction (dummy variables) on post-treatment interest indicated that initial interest accounted for 37% of a total of 51% of the explained variance ($R = .71$, $R^2 = .51$, partial $r = .66$). The third hypothesis--that initial interest in attending a film will account for a significantly greater percentage of the variance in post-treatment interest than review direction--was thus accepted. Pretest, posttest, and gain score means for each treatment--rank-ordered by posttest--are reported in Table 3.

Insert Table 3 about here

The fourth hypothesis--that films with different initial interest levels will retain their initial

interest rank order within treatments and will retain their general rank order--was also accepted. As both Table 3 and the graph in Figure 1 show, no review moved its film out of rank order with films of different interest levels receiving the same review treatment, although differences in posttest means were not always significant according to the Tukey-HSD procedure.[1] Correlation between pretest and posttest rank order was moderate and significant (Kendall's tau_b = .52, p < .05), indicating limited shuffling of interest levels.

Insert Figure 1 about here

All reviews produced results in the predicted direction as measured by gain scores. Mixed reviews, as expected, exercised the least effect on interest change in all three initial interest conditions. Further, nonreviews proved almost as effective as positive reviews in increasing interest, thus replicating and extending previous results (Wyatt & Badger, 1987, 1988) demonstrating that neutral information exercises a positive effect alone or when combined with positive evaluation, but that mixed or negative evaluations override this effect.

Certain asymmetries of effects, though not significant, were observed among films with different initial interest levels. In the low interest condition, as Figure 1 indicates, the negative review decreased interest only moderately, the mixed review actually increased interest modestly, and the positive review increased interest considerably. The negative review of the moderate and high interest films, however, lowered interest dramatically; yet, the positive review of the high interest film still raised interest markedly.

These asymmetries meant that post-treatment interest levels of the low interest film approached those of the moderate interest film. But a 4 x 3 (review direction by initial interest category) ANOVA indicated no significant interaction between review direction and whether a film was classified as low, moderate or high interest, $F(6,389) = 1.77$, $p > .05$. Thus, the effect of different review directions was statistically uniform from interest level to interest level despite the apparent fluctuations.

Discussion

The effects of reviews on films of different interest levels are relatively uniform from negative through mixed to positive. Reviews, because of their

relatively limited effect, are incapable of transmogrifying a film of one initial interest level into a film of a much higher interest level. The positive review of a low interest film did elevate interest to a position near the middle of the rank order--making the low interest film, in fact, about as interesting as the positive review made the moderate interest film. But the mixed and positive reviews of the high interest film still produced interest levels markedly higher than the positive review of the low interest film--relations Figure 1 should make clear.

The fact that the nonreview increased film-attendance interest even in the low initial interest condition demonstrates the uniformly positive effect of neutral information. Rather than decreasing already low interest by providing additional dreary details about a film already judged as boring, additional neutral information proved highly positive. Thus, in the absence of negative evaluations, neutral publicity is as beneficial statistically as superlatives.

Conclusions

The combined results of the three experiments suggest that the previously outlined Initial Interest Modification Model is robust and reasonably complete.

Initial interest and review direction together explained an impressive portion (51%) of the variance in post-treatment interest. The fact that initial interest alone accounted for such a large percentage of the explained variance (nearly three-fourths of that 51%) indicates that reviews modify initial interest rather than create or radically transform it.

This model distinguishes between latent and manifest initial interest because it assumes that the parameters of interest in a specific work of art are already generally established before audience members have even the slightest intimation that the given work of art exists. Without resorting to metaphysical explanations of how something may potentially exist before it exists in actuality, we generally know to what degree we are interested in a new idea the moment we hear it.

Often, reviews provide audiences with their first notice of an artistic production, and, in such cases, they both actualize and manipulate latent interest. In other cases, reviews operate on manifest interest already actualized by prior interpersonal communication, publicity, or advertising.

This research indicates that initial interest can be measured reliably by a method that does not contaminate future measurement. Thus, as Handel (1950) suggested four decades ago, producers and artists might do well to discover initial interest through inexpensive pretesting before they embark on costly creative projects.

Future research might profitably examine whether complex dimensions underlie interest and seek to discover how those dimensions are related to consumer behavior. Further, this model would profit from a more thorough understanding of the cognitive processes that lead to acceptance, adaptation, or rejection of the information and evaluation contained in reviews--although this study and previous research (Wyatt & Badger, 1987, 1988) show that straightforward influence is the norm. It is, however, quite possible that reviews of events with high initial interest are still processed differently than those treating moderate or low interest events.

An understanding of how reviews influence audiences might also lead to future theorizing and research about a new category of persuasion, <u>evaluative persuasion</u>. In evaluative persuasion, changes in

audience interest and other attitudinal and behavioral variables are influenced by value judgments rather than by argumentation and other standard rhetorical strategies. Such value judgments often appear in the mass media under conditions where the audience has little or no additional information by which to assess their truth or falsity--except for the reviewer's assertion. A new film is judged excellent, a new restaurant is styled mediocre, an advertiser's product is asserted to be superior without any corroboration except the communicator's fiat. An understanding of the cognitive processes underlying audience acceptance or rejection of such evaluative statements could not help but enrich communication theory.

Far from suggesting that evaluative journalism is unimportant in the interest-forming, this experiment has demonstrated that reviews exercise significant effects whose importance should not be underestimated by artists and producers. If reviews fail to produce effects as powerful as subjects' initial interest, that fact does not demonstrate that reviews are unimportant but that what people already are is more important than the messages they receive at any given moment--arguably a truism for all communication behavior.

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Footnotes

[1]In a pretest-posttest experimental design multiple range procedures such as the Tukey-HSD test should ideally be applied to the gain scores when simple analysis of variance is employed as the test of significance or to the adjusted means when analysis of covariance is used, thereby correcting for any variation in pretest scores, no matter how small and non-significant. However, gain scores or adjusted means here only allow the effects of different review directions to be compared, not the final position of all posttest means. Therefore, the Tukey procedure has been reported for the posttest means only, a solution defensible because the Solomon design found pretest effects insignificant and because pretest effects, in any event, are uniform across treatment groups. Multiple range procedures are sensitive to small differences and should be interpreted cautiously.

Table 1

Mean Film-Interest Scores For Solomon Design Examining Pretest Condition by Four Review Treatments

Review Treatment	Pretest	Posttest	Gain
Negative	43.63	24.89	-18.74
		26.84	
Mixed	49.47	46.24	- 3.24
		49.79	
Nonreview	50.65	56.17	5.22
		56.55	
Positive	44.80	52.05	7.25
		59.29	

Table 2

Rank Orders and Interest Means for Low, Moderate and High Interest Films During Three Pretests

Pretest Group (N of Films, Test-group M, SD)	Low Interest	Moderate Interest	High Interest
First (12, 43.98, 15.92)			
Rank Order	12	4	1
M	25.07	47.10	58.08
Second (12, 43.53, 16.90)			
Rank Order	12	4	1
M	26.72	47.58	60.48
Third (8, 44.01, 15.68)			
Rank Order	8	3	1
M	26.70	52.05	62.74

Table 3

Interest Scores for Four Review Directions for Low, Moderate and High Interest Films

Review Direction (Rank-ordered by Posttest)	Interest Category	Pretest Score	Posttest Score	Gain Score
Negative	Low	30.69	24.00_{a}	-4.40
Negative	Moderate	43.63	24.89_{a}	-18.74
Mixed	Low	25.40	29.31_{ab}	3.03
Nonreview	Low	22.03	34.76_{abc}	12.73
Negative	High	63.44	38.78_{abcd}	-23.17
Mixed	Moderate	49.47	46.24_{bcde}	- 3.24
Positive	Low	30.19	49.31_{bcde}	19.13
Positive	Moderate	44.80	52.05_{cde}	7.25
Nonreview	Moderate	50.65	56.17_{ef}	5.22
Mixed	High	65.03	61.03_{f}	- 3.85
Nonreview	High	62.26	71.88_{f}	7.35
Positive	High	60.15	74.58_{f}	15.61

Note. Means sharing the same subscript not significantly different on Tukey-HSD procedure.

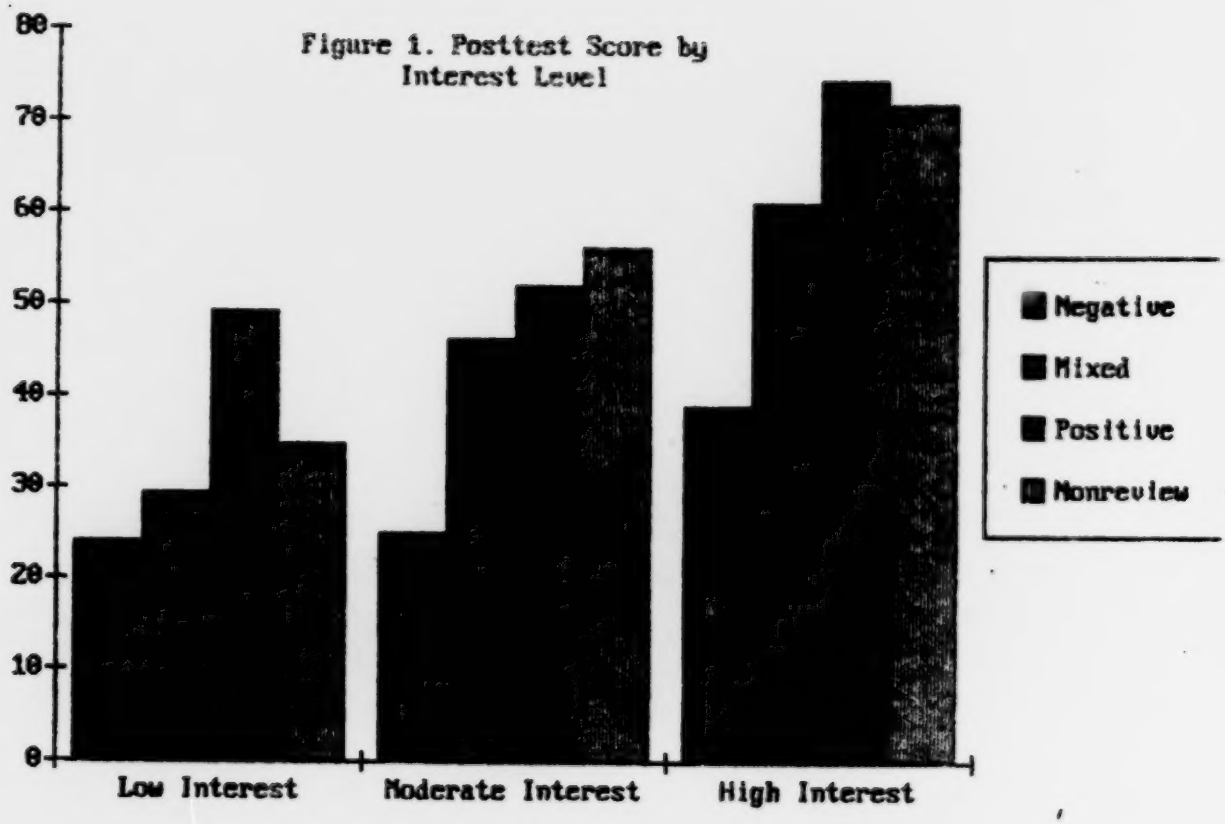
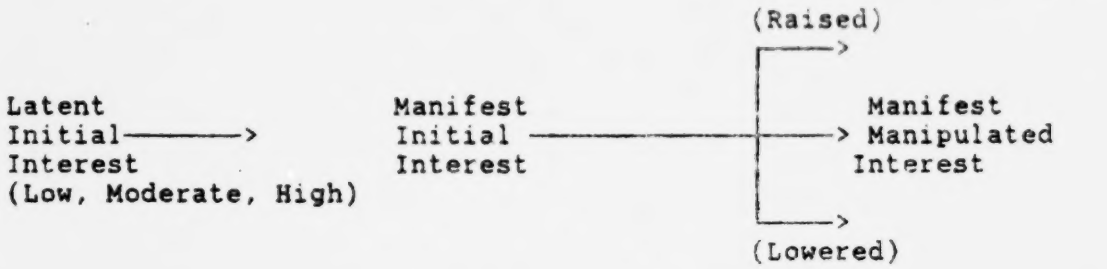


Figure 1. Posttest Score by Interest Level
80
70
60
50
40
30
20
10
0
Low Interest
Moderate Interest
High Interest
Negative
Mixed
Positive
Nonreview

Figure 2

Overall Model of the Initial Interest Modification Process



Unactivated potential interest	Activated by brief verbal description; measured nonreactively by 0-100 scale	Raised by extended verbal description; raised by positive evaluation; left unchanged or raised or lowered slightly by mixed evaluation; lowered by negative evaluation